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ABSTRACT

With the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos from his 20-year rule of the Philippines, the news media regained its freedom and its voice, and now faces a new set of problems: low circulation, questionable ethical standards of reporters and their lack of experience, and ominous indications from the Corazon Aquino government that the administration might take actions against the media. If Filipino journalists do not learn from history, and the perception of the press as sensationalistic and rumor based does not change, President Aquino may adopt legislation forcing the news media to be more responsive to the needs of a developing nation. (Twenty-eight notes are included.) (SR)

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THE PHILIPPINE PRESS AFTER MARCOS: RESTORED FREEDOMS AND NEW PROBLEMS

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THE PHILIPPINE PRESS AFTER MARCOS:
RESTORED FREEDOMS AND NEW PROBLEMS

After Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown from his 20-year rule of the Philippines, which included eight years of Martial Law, the press regained its freedoms. When he fled the nation in February, 1986, there were only four newspapers being published in Manila. Almost overnight newspapers were established satisfying a public hungry for news. In January, 1989, there were 27 dailies. The era of "Xerox Journalism" was over.*

Now that the news media has regained its freedoms and its voice, newspapers are facing a new set of problems: low circulations; questionable ethical standards of reporters and their lack of experience; and ominous indications from the Corazon Aquino government that her administration might take actions against the media.

Before describing those problems, it should be noted that the Philippines faces numerous national issues. These include widespread poverty and unemployment with per capita income about $600 annually. Manila, a city of about 10 million, has an estimated one million squatters who have fled the provinces because of lack of jobs, clashes between the military and the New Peoples Army (called rebels or insurgents). The NPA claims to control about 20 percent of the nation's barangays (villages). And the National Moro Liberation Front on the island of Mindanao seeks local autonomy and has had military engagements with the Philippine Armed Forces. Both the NPA and the NMLF have kidnapped and killed local and foreign offcials. To a limited extent, there are still Marcos supporters who criticize President Aquino. In addition, the Aquino administration would like to improve its image abroad to attract more foreign investments and tourists. Hence comments about the news media should be understood within that national context.

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* Xerox Journalism is used to define the underground or illegal publishing during Martial Law. Photocopying of newspapers smuggled into the country was common. Marcos tried to license all photocopying machines and typewriters to eliminate this practice. He did not succeed.

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Concerning the news media, it would also be helpful to provide some historical perspective of the press before current problems can described in this paper. The Philippines is a unique Asian nation. It is predominently Catholic, largely English speaking*, and it has been occupied by several invading powers. It has another unique aspect: It is the only nation in Southeast Asia with a free press. Indonesia, Thailand, Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore have laws defining how far the press can go in carrying articles on "sensitive issues."[1] Press freedom in the Philippines is a legacy of American occupation just as the teaching of English was imposed.

After World War II, the Philippine press was described as "enterprise reporting at its best. Newspapers searched out every crack in the armor of officialdom, exposing, exposing, exposing. It was 'Slam-Bang' Journalism ...with hastily put, cropping-up-overnight, and independent newspapers pouncing on the government's least mistakes and making national issues out of them. The press sported an immoderate language; it was a natural aftermath borne out of being suddenly set free."[2] Forty years later, the same could be said of the state of nation's press. Instead of being muzzled by the Japanese, the news media are emerging from Martial Law. Before Martial Law there were 17 dailies, 66 provincial papers, 310 radio and 19 television stations. At that time, the president of the Philippine Associaiton of National Advertisers complained there too many newspapers with "woefully limited circulations."[3]

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* In September, 1988, President Aquino announced that Tagalog would become the official language of the Philippines, replacing English. But many Filipinos object to that ruling for a number of reasons which are beyond this paper. Moreover, literacy in English is declining natinnally, especially in the provinces.

1 Lent, John, Newspapers in Asia, Heinemann, Hong Kong. 1982.

2 Dr. Guioguio, Reynaldo, "The Philippine Press: Reorienting the Message," The Journalist's Journal, Philippine Press Forum, The Philippines Press Institute, Vol,II, No.2, Manila,1988,p8.

3 Pineda-Ofreno, Rosalind, The Manipulated Press, 2nd Ed., Solar Publishing Corp., Metro Manila, 1986, p. 133.

In addition to the 27 dailies in Metro Manila, there are about 290 provincial newspapers. Manila newspapers distributed to the provinces have limited circulations of about 20,000 to 30,000. This is due to high cost of papers which sell from P5 pesos to P10 pesos ($1 =P21 pesos). Local provincial weeklies sell for about P1.50 pesos. The Manila Bulletin leads in circulation with 250,000, followed by the Philippine Daily Inquirer with 190,000. The Philippine Star is third with 100,000, and Malaya is fourth with 67,000. There are also the tabloids such as Balita, Peoples Journal and Peoples Tonight* each with circulations of about 180,000.

One Philippine journalism scholar has observed that in March, 1987, the total circulation of 13 major dailies was 1.3 million. But in October, 1987, the figure dropped to 670,000. The tabloids' circulation dropped during the same period from 1.4 million to slightly more than one million.[4]

In broadcasting, there are 308 radio stations (236 AM and 72 FM) and 45 television stations. In the urban areas, about three out of five households have TV sets; and only 20 percent of rural housholds own a TV set. Nationally, about 77 percent of the country's homes have a radio set. What these figures indicate is that with a total population of about 60 million, daily newspaper readership is lacking, and that Filipinos rely more on radio as a mass means of news and information than television and newspapers. Because of unemployment and poverty, many Filipinos cannot afford the two or four pesos to buy a daily in Manila or to purchase a TV set.

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* Some newspapers are reluctant to disclose their actual circulations because of the tendancy to inflate figures for advertising purposes. There is no equivalent of the Audit Bureau of Circulations as used in the U.S. Hence circulation figures are not verifiable.

4 Dr. Guioguio, Reynaldo, "The Philippine Press: Reorienting the Message," The Journalists Journal, Philippine Press Forum, The Philippines Press Institute, Vol. II, No. 2, 1988, Manila, p.8.

Concerning the drop in circulation, there are several possible explanations. First, many readers were anxious for news after Marcos left the country. But after the national euphoria diminished, so too did readers' thirst for news. Second, readers may have a low esteem for the performance of the press. This could be related to the criticism that except for several tabloids, all Manila dailies are printed in English and are considered elitist, catering only to those who feel comfortable reading English. Another criticism is that the dailies are Manila-centered, tending to concentrate coverage on Metro Manila and governmental activities at the expense of failing to cover provincial activities.

Journalism Professor Guioguio has written: "There is a wide gulf that separates criticism that we read daily in our newspapers from social criticism. What passes off as criticism by the press...are more of the foibles of the rich and famous and not so famous and devoid of insights as to how Philippine society behaves or how we should conduct our affiars. In short, most press reporting or news coverage does not add up to a better understanding of who we are and where our society is headed....what happened to the plight of 70 percent of our people who are officially classified as poor. How about the millions of farm households chained to the land by generations of penury and oppression? Don't they deserve a column or news coverage or editorial the way that a congressman or senator manages to say something in the newspapers eve almost every day?"[5] And Marcelo Lagmay, managing edtror of Balita , and president of the National Press Club, said: "We're only good at putting out papers and so bad in giving out news. Newsprint is costly and newspapers are too expensive for the masses. Newsprint amounts to 80 percent of a newspaper's costs. We have failed to reach the masses and have become an elite media."[6]

5 Guioguio, op cit.
6 Lagmay, Marcelo, Interview, Nov. 11, 1988. Manila.

The issue of ethical standards for reporters and their lack of experience is a concern for many editors and publishers in Manila. Two terms have been used to describe these problems: "Envelopment(al) Journalism," and "Smoky Mountain Journalism." The first term applies to the practice of some journalists accepting bribes from sources, government or corporate officials and public relations persons. The term comes from the practice of placing money in envelopes given to reporters in exchange for favorable news stories. The practice is not new and was frequently used by the Marcos administration. Most newspaper executives condemn the practice and have policies requiring reporters to give the money to editors who pass it on to charity. Malaya newspaper columnist Jerry Barican wrote: "The current press is the strange, often tasteless and many times corruptible fruit of this Tree of Liberty....There are whispered claims by politicians of ABC Journalism -- attack, blackmail, collect--the manipulation of the slant of news stories by the occasional pressmen to extort money."[7] And the Manila Chronicle in June, 1988 carried a page one editorial criticizing envelopmental journalism.[8]

The term, "Smoky Mountain Journalism" applies to the type of journalism dealing with the collecting of bits of political trivia and gossip and stringing them into a "senseless, mindless catelog of events that serves to titilate the readers rather than make them think. It is the screaming headlines, the lurid photos that entice the reader. The prospect of peace never sold a newspaper; portraits of war, violence, sordid tales do."[9] The phrase originated when foreign correspondents wrote and filed stories about a large garbage dump in the Tondo areas of Manila. *

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7. Malaya, Sept. 10, 1988.
8. Manila Chronicle, June 12, 1988.
9 Guioguio, op cit.

* Tondo is a huge garbage dump which has created its own community of squatters and scavangers making a living from recycling refuse. After the initial publicity, tour buses carry tourists to the area --to the chagrin of government officials.

Concerning the lack of experienced reporters, one longtime foreign correspondent described the current generation of journalists as timid, failing to ask tough questions of public officials and allowing themselves to be used by self-serving politicians. "We lost a whole generation of reporters and editors during Martial Law under Marcos. Most of the reporters are young, fresh from the university, or very old, those who were working before Martial Law. The result is that experienced reporters are in short supply."[10] During the Marcos years, about 35 journalists were killed; others were harassed, jailed or corrupted.[11]

Amado Macasaet, publisher of Malaya, stated: "I hear reports of graft and corruption among reporters daily. These emanate from politicians. The news media has become the unwitting tool of politicians, who are protected by Congressional immunity. The press needs to check the truth of statements. The quality of reporting has deteriorated considerably. The young reporters are not as hard working as the earlier ones. The press was jellyfish under Marcos, and has become licentious under press freedom... Many journalists are not fit to be called that. We have the wrong people entering the right profession. Low pay is the problem.* It drives out the competent people and wrong people enter. The results are decay in the profession."[12]

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10 Miller, Matt, Asian Wall Street Journal Manila correspondent, interview, Manila, June 8, 1988.

11 Nieva, Tony, president, National Press Club, interview, Manila, Jan. 9, 1989.

12 Macasaet, Amado, publisher, Malaya, speech, National Press Club, Manila, Nov. 11, 1988.

* Pay scales for reporters range from P2,000 to P8,000 (U.S. $100-$400) weekly, depending on the newspaper, and on the reporter's experience. Some pay by the column inch , P10 to P15 per inch ($.50 to $.75).

Alice Colet Villadolid, executive director of the Philippine Press Institute, stated that the current generation of reporters is "very young. They're in over their heads and are not well educated or experienced. One asked, 'What does bi-cameral mean?'" She added that there is no newspaper guild in the Philippines. "Pay scales differ and range, but journalists are trying to organize."[13] PPI conducts workshops and classes for reporters and editors stressing journalism skills and on issues such as national development and on population control. The Asian Institute for Journalism, the Press Foundation of Asia, the National Press Club, and the College of Mass Communications at the University of the Philippines also hold classes and workshops for reporters and editors.

Evening Star columnist Art A. Borjal, a respected writer and former president of the National Press Club, noted that the news media tends to be Manila centered failing to cover the provinces and emphasizing the sensational. "Media must do some soul searching. Since the great majority of Filipinos live out there in the countryside, media should give bigger projection to happenings outside Metro Manila...can't there be a good balance in the reporting of positive and negative stories."[14]

Another Manila journalist provided a more balanced observation of the Philippine press: "Just as government, journalism has its share of responsible workers, perhaps a majority. There are publishers, journalists and columnists who take their craft seriously and are constantly trying to do better despite limited budgets and fierce competiton.... The press accurately reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the Filipino."[15]

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13 Villadolid, Alice Colet, executive director, Philippine Press Institute, interview, Manila, July 8, 1988.
14 Evening Star, Sept. 6, 1988.
15 Malaya, Sept. 10, 1988.

Another problem area for the news media deals with relations with the new Aquino government. Before she took office, relations between her and the press was cordial. She needed good coverage, and the media provided sympathetic and positive coverage. Media people wanted Marcos out. Now the novelty has worn off. Because she had not held public office before, some observers feel she was not prepared for dealing with the press. She did not meet with the press on a regular basis. Reporters covering the government palace, Malacanang, began the practice of "Ambush Journalism" in which they would attempt unscheduled interviews while the President was traveling. She finally adopted a policy of scheduled news converences eliminating the practice of reporters "jumping from the bushes" on palace grounds.

Another example of her inexperience with media concerns her perceptions of foreign correspondents. During Marcos' reign, foreign correspondents were heavily relied upon for information coming into the Philippines since the local press was controlled. Foreign correspondents held a high place in media circles and by Mrs. Aquino. But again, relations have changed. Now the Aquino administration is concerned about its image abroad.* If a nation has a negative image overseas, it could have an adverse impact on tourism, investments and trade. Hence it was not surprising when President Aquino criticized news stories filed by correspondents in Manila which carried critical acoounts. Such stories were about NPA activities, kidnappings, assassinations, human rights violations, the National Moro Liberation Front, ferry disasters, pro-Marcos supporters and typhoons. She used the term "Short Time Journalists" in describing correspondents who were in the country for a brief period, filed stories and left. "Our nationalism ...should turn on something higher than the insults of short Time journalists...It is time we do not allow these short-time journalists to influence us in our thinking. I insist they live here to know the situation better."[16]

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16 Philippines Inquirer, July 27, 1988.

* In August, 1988, she announced plans to create a Foreign Information Council which would prepare daily information packages to offset negative publicity printed abroad. The Philippines Inquirer criticized the plan because it would be similar to a program of former President Marcos.

As mentioned earlier, a related issue prompting concern among the media deals with coverage of the New Peoples Army. Reporters and photographers are asking themselves how far should they can go in providing space and airtime to the NPA or to the National Moro Liberation Front which both seek favorable publicity. Employees at Two radio stations, DWTI and DWLQ in Lucena City were arrested by Philippine Constabulary troopers for "sabotaging" operations to free seven soldiers captured by communist rebel forces. A Inquirer columnist who was harrassed by Marcos' troops in 1972 wrote: "The military hasn't changed at all. It still wants to control the media and use them for its propaganda." If the media expose military lies, the "military considers media an obstacle and must be destroyed."[17]

Jose Luis Alcuaz, commissioner of National Telecommunications Commission warned that radio and TV stations broadcasting what he called "pro communist propaganda" will be shut down. "The NTC will not allow outlawed groups to use local TV and radio stations to propagate their objectives." He added there is no room for neutrality in the government's on-going struggle with the NPA.[18] In Bacolod City the NPA claimed credit for burning of RAdio station DYKB. And local newsmen there said they receive pressue from NPA members to provide airtime to broadcast their releases. Military officials argue that those messages can carry hidden or coded signals for other NPA units or sympathizers. Hence such messages should be banned for military reasons.[19] And some correspondents based in the provinces are sympathetic to the NPA and have filed stories to Metro Manila dailies favorable to NPA activities.

Alcuaz's threat was not idde. In August,1986, during an attempted military coup d'etat, NTC shut down Television Channel 13, and five radio stations, DZRH, DZME, DZAM, DWBC, and DZEC. He said they posed an "imminent threat" to state security.[20] The closure was protested by the National Press Club and other groups.

17 Philippine Daily Inquirer, Dec. 11, 1988.
18 Malaya, Aug. 12, 1988.
19 Bacolod City PRESs Club members, interview, Bacolod, Sept. 16, 1988.
20 Almario, Manuel, "New Threats to Press Freedom," The Filipino Journalist, Vol. II, No.1, January-February, 1988, National Press Club, Manila, p.8.

DISCUSSION

The Philippines' 1987 Constitution states: "No law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression and of the press." The document also states that the mass media "play a critical role in nation-building," and that the advertising industry is impressed with public interest and shall be regulated by law for the protection of consumers and the promotion of the general welfare."*

A media adviser to President Aquino stated: "...Because this administration has opted for media freedom, albeit licentious at times, it is reaping a progressively bitter harvest of counterproductive and destructive campaign against it through mass communication. As one who is in government service...I am progressively more tempted to wish for media control in the face of the carefully guided malice of some practioneers who are out to erode the people's confidence in government. But my own personal struggle against controls and censorship has been so intense and now an integreal part of my consciousness, that I simply cannot move towards that direction. But I can ask for more productive communication, even in criticism which is necessary to prod government towards more efficiency...But if criticism becomes a tool for violence and destruction, what is its worth as a tool?"[21]

In a sense, Ms. Montelibano's speech could be perceived as a veiled threat. If she represents the thinking and attitudes of the Aquino administration, then practioners in the news media will need to do some soul searching. It is would not be surprising that the government propose legislation aimed at restricting the media. Whether the President, the National Telecommunications Commission, or Congress take action remains to be seen.

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21 Maria V. Montelibano, Radio Television Malacanang, and broadcast adviser to President Aquino, speech, University of the Philippines, Sept. 5, 1988.

* Another issue dealing with possible government restrictions of the media is "Filipiniaation of the media." This includes advertising, TV and radio. More than 10 bills were filed in Congress to restrict use of foreign models, excessive advertising, ban tobacco advertising and to Preserve, enrich and promote Filipino national heritage and cultural traditions. Congress also seeks more authority to regulate and censor films and TV programs to control pornography and promote national development. See Malaya, Aug. 28, 1988 and Manila Chronicle, Aug. 31, 1988.

Some members of the Philippine press corps are in agreement with their counterparts in other Southeast Asian nations. The Press Corps of the Association of Association of SE Nations adopted a statement which said the press should "exercise self-restraint and good sense in reporting to avoid tensions between different ethnic, racial and religious groups. The statement said ASEAN journalists are partners in development and its main priority should be the promotion and preservation of political stablity, rapid economic growth, social justice and greater regional cohesion. "The media has to be circumspect about certain reporting..good sense and sound editorial judgement must at all times prevail."[21]

A respected Manila Manila Chronicle columnist observed that the Aquino government has started to "redefine its relationship with the news media. The President issued a directive restricting movements of reporters at Manila's international airport (because of alleged misconduct by reporters) in certain areas. Then the government stopped the practice of allowing reporters to attend Cabinet meetings. "...These new ground rules have raised issues about press freedom. The issue is how far press freedom can go in a democratic society?"[22] Another columnist wrote, "The mass communications industry ails from organic and functional shortcomings and weaknesses, but these cannot be remedied by triflying with the constitutional guarantees of free speech and free press."[23] And veteran journalist and former University of the Philippines Journalism Dean Armando Malay called for a " nationwide union of journalists to counter rampant corruption in the profession and to answer the basic problems of journalists such as low pay and lack of ethics."[24]

22 Philippine Inquirer, Aug. 29, 1988.
23 Manila Chronicle, Jan. 6, 1989.
24 Evening Star, Sept. 6, 1988.
25 Manila Chronicle, July 31, 1988. A National Union of Journalists was established in late 1988.

It is hardly surprising that the news media is flexing its muscles after many years of repression. Abuses occur. Public officials will use the press as well the New Peoples Army. Journalists will learn their lessions, sometimes painfully. The press is eager and aggressive, but inexperienced. Dr. Crispin Maslog describes the media as a "hungry dragon." He cites numerous expamples of irresponsible journalism and writes: "In the history of Asian nations, periods of repression have beнn followed by periods of freedom which led to licentiousness, which in turn compelled suppression, which in turn compelled suppression to be imposed by the ruling power....If Filipino journalists have not yet learned this historical truth, they might be condemned to a worse fate than that which they have jst managed to survive."[26]

A U.S. State Department press officer, however, observed that "these is a sense among some Philippine journalists that they have learned some hard lessons about the value of a free press since 1972 when Martial Law was imposed. Thus while many papers indulge in excesses of all kinds, there is also a substantial core of hard working, responsible journalists and editors whose work does credit to the ideal of press freedom." He also noted that the press still "in transition and searching for solid, institutional roots in the new democratic order."[27]

Meanwhile, the shortage of experienced reporters and editors, the new political openess of the country, a nationalistic orientation of some young journalists plus fierce competition among the dailies have combined to produce what has been called, "a high degree of sensationalistic, off-the-wall reportage and rumor-based or puerile commentary."[28] If Filipino journalists do not learn from history, and if that perception and description of the press does not change, the Aquino goverment, faced with numerous national problems, may adopt legislation forcing the news media to be more responsive to the needs of a developing nation.

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26 Maslog, Crispin, "The Filipino Journalist's New Found Freedrom," Philippines Communication Journal, Vol.1, No1, December, 1986, p.45.

27 "The Philippine Media," unclassified report of the U.S. Information Service, U.S. Embassy, Manila, Nov. 3, 1987, pp.1-2.

28 ibid.